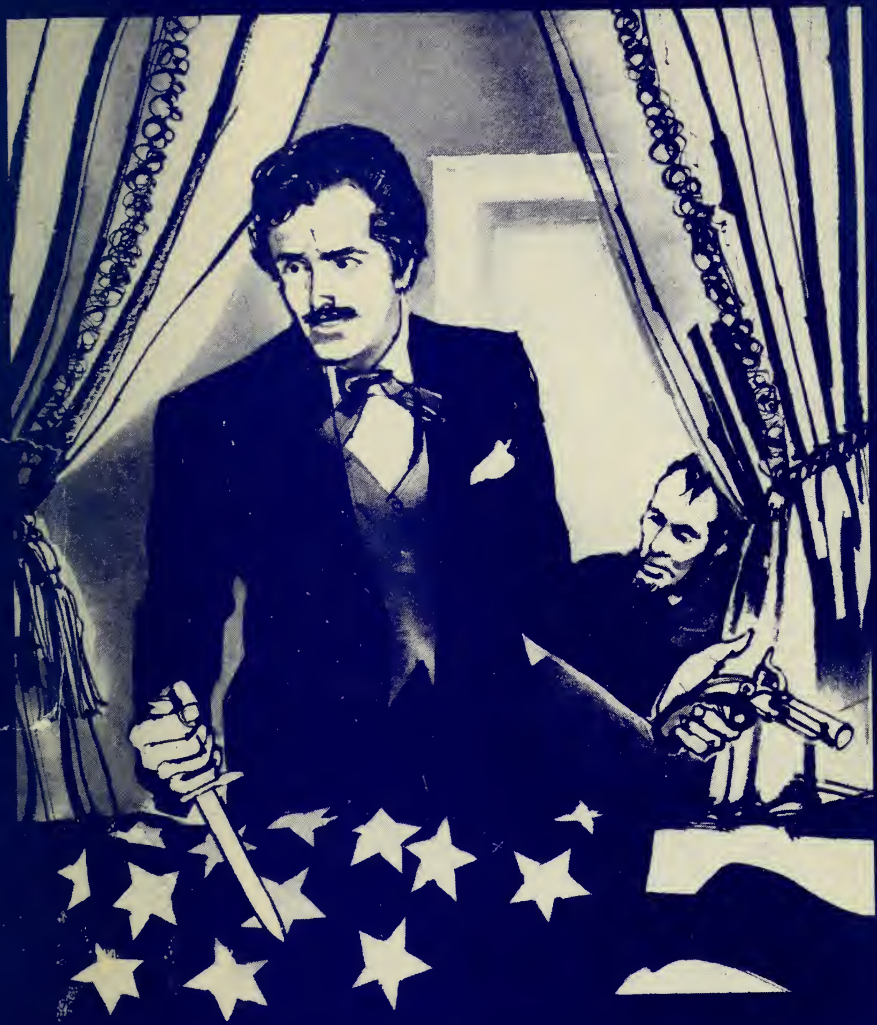

# THE KING CAN DO NO WRONG

William L. Reuter

$2.50

# THE KING CAN DO NO WRONG

## A Story from History

by

WILLIAM L. REUTER

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Here is an eye witness account—never before published—of the capture and death of John Wilkes Booth, the flamboyant assassin of Abraham Lincoln.

Controversy still surrounds the true story of Booth's last days alive. Some historians even challenge whether it was actually Booth who was hunted down and shot.

Now, in an account that should dispel all doubts, Dr. William L. Reuter presents a dramatic description of these events by Lt. Col. Everton J. Conger, the man who led the Federal troops that cornered Booth in a barn on the Garrett farm and witnessed his death.

This story was related by Colonel Conger in 1916 to a friend who visited him at his home in Montana. The interview was transcribed by a stenographer and the notes later came into the possession of Dr. Reuter. There is no record that this interview has ever been made public before now except for a number of typed copies used in his college classes by the friend who interviewed the colonel.

In preparing Colonel Conger's eye witness story for publication, Dr. Reuter has

*(Continued on back flap)*

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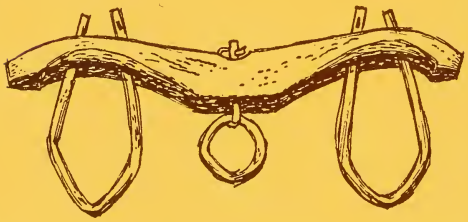

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*and*
HENRIETTA CALHOUN HORNER

*The*

# KING

# CAN DO NO WRONG

# *The*
# KING
# CAN DO NO WRONG

• ● •

*By*

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## INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT . . .

THE DRAMATIC STORY OF THE CAPture of John Wilkes Booth, actor and Southern sympathizer, who assassinated President Lincoln, is related here mainly in the words of the principal figure in Booth's capture, Lt. Colonel Everton J. Conger. The story is remarkable because of an earlier incident during the war that was later related to the pursuit and capture of Booth and Herold. The facts presented in the story are enhanced by the vivid description and style of the colonel in recalling the actual steps in the capture of Booth. The story was recalled by Colonel Conger fifty-one years afer the event (1916).

A number of recent stories tend to arouse a doubt in the mind of the reader as to whether Booth was actually captured or another man killed in place of Booth. Colonel Conger rarely related any of his war experiences and there is no record of his writing the true story concerning the capture of Booth. The colonel did describe the chain of events leading to the capture and death of Booth to a friend who visited him in Dillon, Montana. The story was recorded by a stenographer who transcribed his notes immediately afterwards. There is no record that this account was ever published except for a number of typed copies used in some college classes by the friend who interviewed Colonel Conger for the story.

The purpose of preparing this story for publication is to preserve a valuable incident that affected American history very much. It is written to dispel some doubts as to what actually happened to the man who shot and fatally wounded President Lincoln. This story should be published to make it available to many people who are interested in American history and the stories of our country.

The original narrator of the story was a well-educated man. He was a lawyer and a judge, also an officer of merit in the Civil War. Colonel Conger was somewhat modest and reticent in disposition. His law background was an asset in putting together an accurate and vivid account of events as they happened at the time.

The narrative contains Colonel Conger's own words plus additional descriptions concerning the times, events and places mentioned by the narrator. No attempt has been made to embellish any phase of the story.

## AFTERMATH . . .

The news of generals Lee's surrender to Lt.-General U. S. Grant, at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, reached Washington the following morning, Monday, April 10, 1865. The Army of the Potomac had been slowly encircling Lee and punishing him at every opportunity. The Capitol at Richmond had fallen and Petersburg was hailed as a great Northern victory. The final blow had been delivered and Lee had just surrendered the remnants of a once proud and courageous army.

The populace in Washington had been anticipating the end of hostilities and was ready to celebrate in a grand way. The frenzied celebration continued for days and nights. People paraded in the streets and joined in with thousands of soldiers in voicing their feelings of victory. Places of entertainment and saloons were doing a land-office business. The bars seemed to have a sufficient quantity of whiskey to keep the crowds in a happy and boisterous mood.

Though the vast majority of people in Washington were jubilant over the success of the North in suppressing the rebellion, a few were bitterly disappointed. The shouts of the crowd, the boom of the cannons and the torch-light parades added to their bitterness. These people, chief among them John Wilkes Booth, directed their hatred at the man responsible for bringing such a plight to the South—

Abraham Lincoln. The North would look upon its President as a savior and the victory as a personal triumph in his career. Booth's own hatred of Lincoln was intensified by the thought that now the North would shower its President with greater honors and glories. His hatred was driving him toward abnormal action; an opportunity to avenge the South and show Lincoln in his true light—a persecutor.

John Wilkes Booth was the son of Junius Brutus Booth, an English actor, who came to America in 1821. Junius Booth was considered by many critics to be the greatest tragedian of his time. John's brother Edwin was a noted American actor who was esteemed by American critics as one of the great Shakespearean actors of his time.

John Booth followed in the steps of his father for several years as an actor, but met with indifferent success and abandoned the stage in 1863. During the Civil War years he was a violent secessionist, and toward its close organized a conspiracy for abducting the President and turning him over to the Confederate government in Richmond.

With the fall of Richmond and Petersburg the abduction plan had to be abandoned. The only solution remaining was the death of his people's tyrant. Booth would have to reorganize his conspirators and work out a quick plan of action. The plot's intended victims should include others beside the President—Grant and some of the cabinet members who were equally guilty in torturing the South. He, Booth, would play the major role. Lincoln would fall by his hand. Grant, Seward, Johnson and Stanton would be left to the other members of his group. Booth planned with Lewis Paine, David Herold, George Atzerodt, John Surratt and Mrs. Mary Surratt the role they were to play in the tragedy.

An advertisement appeared in the Washington *Evening*

*Star,* April 14, 1865, stating that Lieutenant-General Grant, President and Mrs. Lincoln had secured the State Box at Ford's Theatre that night, to witness Miss Laura Keene in *Our American Cousin.* Booth considered this advertisement an act of Providence. A most perfect setting for an actor to play his most significant role. He could move about with a great deal of freedom and not arouse the suspicions of the actors or employees of the theatre. During the afternoon of April 14 Booth made a careful inspection of the theatre. The State Box was about ten feet above the stage and it should not be difficult for a person to jump from there to the stage and make his exit through the wings to the stage door at the rear of the theatre. The outer door leading into the passageway of the State Box could not be locked so Booth secured a wooden bar nearly four feet long and placed it behind the door to use later that evening to prop the door to prevent entry from the outside.

President Lincoln had, from the time of his election in 1860 up to the time of his death, periodically received threatening letters. These threats did not appear to trouble him, although his friends were continually alarmed by his absolute indifference to them. They implored him to be cautious and not take any unnecessary risks. Lincoln listened to them with calmness and respect but refused any official protection in his jaunts around the city and country.

The newspaper announcement that the President and General Grant would attend the theater that evening packed Ford's Theatre from rafters to pit. General Grant decided to leave Washington that afternoon for New York so he would not be present for the play. President Lincoln was also disinclined, but was hesitant to disappoint the large audience that would be there to see him and Mrs. Lincoln. In his

characteristically good-natured way he decided to attend the performance.

As the time approached for journeying to the play the President was loath to leave some friends who had called at the White House to see him. Mrs. Lincoln came into the room and reminded her husband, "We shall be late, it is now nine o'clock." President Lincoln extended an invitation to his friends to join them, and upon their refusal the President and Mrs. Lincoln left by carriage for the home of Senator Harris. They were joined there by two friends, Major Rathburn and Miss Harris.

Upon the Lincoln party's arrival in the private box at the theatre the entire audience gave the President a tremendous ovation. The President appeared very happy at such unusual enthusiasm and acknowledged the outburst with his usual show of warmth and sincere manner.

Booth entered the theater a few minutes after ten o'clock and made his way toward the door that led to the private box. A guard seated near the box entrance rose and blocked Booth's passage. Booth showed the man a calling card and said, "The President has sent for me." The guard allowed Booth to enter the private box. He slipped the wooden bar he had hidden in the passageway that afternoon between the wall and the door, closing the entrance to the box from all intruders.

This was the exact moment! With pistol in hand Booth entered the President's box unobserved by the people in the box. He held the single-shot derringer close to the President's head and pulled the trigger. The bullet penetrated the President's brain. Lincoln was mortally wounded. He made no outcry, his head sagging forward, smoke rising above him. Major Rathburn tried to subdue Booth but was slashed by

a dagger that Booth pulled from his pocket. The murderer, parting the flag that draped the front of the box, sprang over the box-rail to the stage. One of his spurs caught in the flag and threw him off balance. He landed in a heap upon the stage, all his weight on his left foot. He got up, feeling great pain in his leg, and shouted at the audience, "Sic semper tyrannis."

Booth made his way through the wings to the stage door and rushed outside to his horse. It was difficult to mount because of the pain in his injured leg. Struggling into the saddle the assassin fled into the darkness and the night.

Back in the theatre the audience was in a tumult of terror and excitement. People screamed and men began to run up the aisle toward the stage; some of them scrambled up on it. Noise and confusion reigned. Miss Laura Keene, the actress, begged the audience to be calm. Her pleas went unheeded. An army doctor was hurried from the audience into the President's box and he ordered most of the men to leave so the wounded President could get air. The doctor ordered the President moved from the theatre to a house across the street.

The President remained unconscious through the night. The doctors knew that this was a fatal wound. Mrs. Lincoln and her son Robert waited in the room below. A little past seven o'clock the next morning the President breathed his last. Death had elevated him to the ages.

The other conspirators failed in their mission to bring death to Lincoln's close friends and advisers. Only Lewis Paine came near to succeeding. He gained entry into the home of Secretary Seward and was able to force his way into the sick man's room. The knife Paine wielded did not do serious damage to Seward and before he could strike again

some men drove him off and from the house. Paine was able to make his escape from the soldiers who were running toward the house.

Booth guided his horse toward the Navy Yard Bridge that would open a route into Maryland and then Virginia. He expected to be received by gracious Southern gentlemen who would protect him in his journey to Mexico and perhaps Europe a little later. The sentry at the bridge checked Booth's passage but did not detain him. Booth continued into Maryland to keep a rendezvous with David Herold.

Booth met David Herold about an hour after crossing the Navy Yard Bridge. They had to alter their plans due to the intense pain Booth was suffering from his broken ankle. He needed to visit a doctor before he could continue his escape into Virginia.

They decided to seek the home of Dr. Samuel Mudd who lived in this neighborhood. Booth had met Mudd before on one of his inspection tours into Maryland when he was seeking a route to use when the group had abducted President Lincoln. Dr. Mudd was slightly inclined to assist in this first plot but Booth could not be sure if the doctor would assist him at this time. Booth had no choice—his leg made it impossible for him to keep his position in the saddle.

Doctor Mudd set the broken leg in splints and placed Booth in bed in an upstairs bedroom. The following day Booth and Herold departed from the doctor's home heading south toward a spot that would afford them a chance to cross the river.

For a long week Booth and Herold hid along the river trying to find someone who could secure a boat for them to cross into Virginia. Herold was able to secure food from a few farmhouses that kept them alive during this period.

Booth suffered greatly lying on the damp ground day and night. He cursed the flag that had caused him to break his leg. His escape could have been complete by this time; he could have been among friends of the Confederacy.

Herold located a farmer who aided them in their attempt to cross the river. The first attempt was halted by a Union gunboat on the river. They had to return to shore and wait for another opportunity. The next night they were again unsuccessful due to their inability to navigate a boat at night. They became lost on the river and rowed aimlessly, arriving again on the Maryland shore. Their third attempt to cross into Virginia was successful. The escape route was open before them, they were on Virginia soil, the Potomac behind them. Eight days had been consumed to reach this point, about forty miles from Washington.

The nation, during this time, was wrapped in profound grief. This event brought home to the people the realization that they had lost a personal friend. Great hatred was expressed toward the man who had committed this dastardly deed.

The following notice appeared in the country's newspapers:

## WAR DEPARTMENT, WASHINGTON, APRIL 20, 1865

### $100,000 Reward

THE MURDERER
of our late beloved President, *ABRAHAM LINCOLN,*
IS STILL AT LARGE

### $50,000 Reward

will be paid . . . for his apprehension,
in addition to any reward offered by
Municipal Authorities or State Executives

### $25,000 Reward

will be paid for the apprehension of
JOHN H. SURRAT, one of Booth's accomplices.

### $25,000 Reward

will be paid for the apprehension of
DANIEL C. HARROLD, another of Booth's accomplices.

All persons harboring or secreting the said person . . . or aiding or assisting their concealment or escape, will be treated as accomplices . . . and shall be subject to trial before a Military Commission and the punishment of Death.

Let the stain of innocent blood be removed from the land by the arrest and punishment of the murderers . . . .

EDWIN M. STANTON, *Secretary of War*

The funeral train left Washington on the twenty-first of April, and the body of the martyred President was borne westward to Illinois, from whence he had gone to serve his country and his people. Bells tolled and solemn dirges filled the air.

The train proceeded on through crowds of weeping humanity to Philadelphia and New York where thousands viewed the remains of their beloved President. The cities were arrayed in mourning flags and bunting. From New York, on the afternoon of the twenty-fourth, the funeral train departed. The train was driven by the same engine that had borne Abraham Lincoln, four years before, on his triumphal journey to Washington. On to Albany, Buffalo, Cleveland, Columbus, Indianapolis and Chicago—the home of his adoption.

The casket containing the remains of Lincoln was removed from the train in Chicago, and placed in state in the City Hall. The public filed past the casket, paying its last silent tribute to this illustrious son of Illinois.

On the morning of the third of May the funeral train reached its destination—Springfield. The final tribute was paid to Lincoln at the State House, where a steady stream of friends passed the casket before the final closing of the coffin lid. The body was returned to the earth in Oak Ridge Cemetery near Springfield. The Great Man finally found his rest.

During the time the funeral train was moving westward, receiving the respect of millions, two men were hiding out along the cold and wet bank of the Potomac, suffering mental and physical torture. The sand in the hour glass was running out—the conspirators had a rendezvous with death.

## THE PORT MARLBOROUGH INCIDENT . . .

The eventful pursuit and capture of John Wilkes Booth was brought about, at least in part, by an incident that occurred nearly two years before the President's assassination. The Army of Northern Virginia was at peak strength in the spring of 1863. The spirit of the Confederate troops was very high, the highest since the first months of the war. Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville were synonymous with Union disaster and gloom. "My God! My God! when will this terrible slaughter cease," was the exclamation of Abraham Lincoln in 1863 when details of the terrible slaughter of Hooker's troops were brought to him. It is natural to conceive how, as one side was disappointed and almost despairing, the other should be exhilarated beyond expression.

The North was calling for more troops and the city of Washington was recruiting cavalry up to a full regiment. This regiment was known as the First District of Columbia Cavalry. Colonel Everton J. Conger was assigned the task of organizing and training this new cavalry regiment.

The state of Maryland, surrounding Washington on three sides, was considered a border state and split in her loyalty to the Union. Many men had moved south to fight for the Confederate cause. Many citizens remaining in Maryland were secretly hostile in their attitude toward the present Re-

publican Administration. Many rumors and stories and even letters were dispatched to the authorities in Washington mentioning disloyal acts.

One story in particular was later to be related to the capture of John Wilkes Booth. The incident was reported from Port Marlborough, a town on the Eastern shore, about thirty miles east of Washington. The reports were that they had confined in their jail a man who claimed to be a soldier of one of the Union regiments. These reports were sent to the office of Mr. Stanton, the Secretary of War.

The War Department corresponded with the local authorities in Port Marlborough concerning this rumor but they always denied these reports and rumors. The reports kept coming to the Secretary's office so he decided to investigate the matter.

Secretary Stanton sent for Colonel Conger to report to his office to receive an assignment on this case. Conger reported immediately to the Secretary.

"Are you Colonel Conger?" Stanton asked.

"Yes, sir, I am reporting to you as requested."

"Read these letters and papers and then report back to me later today."

Colonel Conger returned in a few hours to discuss the case with Mr. Stanton.

"Did you read the reports concerning the holding of a Union soldier in their jail down in Port Marlborough?"

"Yes, sir, and I believe that the matter should be investigated immediately."

"The authorities claim that there is absolutely no basis to the reports. We have had considerable correspondence about the matter and they always deny the charge."

"It seems necessary, due to the continued rumors and letters, to decide once and for all about the truth of this matter, Mr. Secretary."

"Do you have any suggestions, Colonel Conger?"

"If you would issue an order from your department to go down to Port Marlborough and investigate the matter I would be willing to comply."

"Well, return to your regiment and prepare for an order to move out immediately. You know where the town is located?"

"Yes, sir, it is on the Eastern shore."

"Do a thorough job while you are there, Colonel."

Colonel Conger returned to his headquarters and had a conference with his officers concerning the assignment that was to be received shortly from the War Department.

"Since we are training these men for combat by hard work and drill we should take as many men as possible on this assignment. I believe a full battalion should be prepared for the field."

The troop moved out from Washington with full field equipment and reached Port Marlborough late in the afternoon. The soldiers were enjoying every minute of their journey—this was far better than routine drill and barracks work.

The town of Port Marlborough was a beautiful village, much larger than Conger had anticipated. There was a public square with a courthouse in the middle, like all Southern Maryland county courthouses. The jail was right beside the courthouse. The citizens came out along the sidewalks to watch the troops ride by. The cavalrymen sat erect in their saddles, looking every inch veterans.

"Battalion, halt. Company officers direct your men to pitch camp and raise the flag here on the public square."

The soldiers were anxious to show the onlookers how real

veterans worked and in a short time the camp was completed. The question of why they were there was raised by many people—some could reason why. Colonel Conger met and talked with some of the citizens and explained the purpose of their visit to Port Marlborough.

Conger inquired about the jail and a number of citizens led him to it. The jail was securely locked and there was no one inside.

"Who has the keys to the jail?"

"The sheriff has the only keys to open the jail," a citizen answered.

"Where is the sheriff? Is he in the crowd?"

"The sheriff is off somewhere, probably fishing," a man said.

The crowd that had assembled before the jail knew by this time what the Union troops had come for and they wanted to see how they would handle the matter. They were content to stand by and not cooperate with Conger in his attempt to search the jail.

The colonel dispatched several men to go out and find the sheriff and bring him to the jail. They failed to return with the sheriff, stating that they could not locate him.

"Men, I am here at the order of the Secretary of War and I intend to carry out his orders to the letter."

"Why did you bring all of these soldiers here for such a small matter of searching our jail?" a spokesman in the crowd inquired.

"There should be no cause for alarm at the number of soldiers because they were brought here for exercise rather than to make a show."

"What are you searching for in our jail, Colonel?" the same man inquired.

"Many reports and letters have come to the attention of

Secretary Stanton reporting a Union soldier held in your jail without due cause. It is my intention to find out if these reports are true. If the jail is not unlocked by your sheriff. I will use force to do so if the circumstances demand it."

The group before the jail discussed the situation and decided that this was the business of the sheriff. The array of Federal troops around them spurred them to action. The sheriff was sent for and this time the messengers were successful in locating him.

"What is your business with me, Colonel?" the sheriff inquired.

"To search your jail for a prisoner that is supposed to be held there without cause."

"I am invested with the sole power of running this county jail and if I do not want people to go into the jail they do not go in."

The crowd before the jail was increasing in number but there was no occasion for excitement. The people were content to have the matter settled by their sheriff.

"Will you be willing to conduct the search yourself, Mr. Sheriff?"

"No one is going to make me open that jail for any purpose."

"You are interfering with the compliance of my orders from Secretary Stanton and your objections will not be honored."

"It is my sovereign right to hold the jail and I will not give up the keys," stated the sheriff.

"Is that your final decision on the subject, Mr. Sheriff."

"It is, Colonel."

An officer was summoned by Colonel Conger to report to him for orders.

"Select a detail from your company, get a sledge or two, an iron crow bar and a couple of iron wedges, and bring them to the jail door."

The officer sent out a sergeant and some of his men who secured the named articles and deposited them in front of the jail door.

The jail was sturdily constructed with very heavy oak doors with heavy iron gratings—double doors. These doors opened outward which would make a forced entry very difficult. The doors were securely locked with heavy iron locks.

"Place your bars under the hinges and break them off and the doors will open," stated Colonel Conger.

"You will not have to break my jail to pieces or tear it down in order to look inside. Call your soldiers off and you may have the keys."

The sheriff took out his keys, and instead of surrendering them to the colonel, tossed them on the ground. Conger was undecided at first whether he should have the sheriff retrieve the keys and hand them to him or have one of his men pick them up for him.

"Sergeant, pick up the keys and open the jail doors so that we may search the building."

"Yes, sir, Colonel."

Inside the entrance was a big open corridor; beyond this was a big room. Part of this spacious room was used solely for the confinement of Negroes. A number of fireplaces were in this room—old-fashioned fireplaces, built in the walls.

In the entrance corridor was a stairway leading upstairs. On the second floor there were some rooms and a hallway. A special room was set aside for keeping women prisoners.

"Lieutenant, take a detail and conduct a thorough search

of the building."

Colonel Conger, being the ranking officer in command, did not take part in the actual search of the jail.

"Sir, we have searched the entire building and have not found anything."

"Are you sure, Lieutenant, that you examined every room and corridor as closely as you might? Perhaps you should try again."

"I am positive that our prisoner is not in this building, Colonel."

Colonel Conger accompanied the soldiers into the building and directed the search in person. The jail contained a large number of Negroes—men and women, and quite a number of children. One old colored woman stood looking through the bars and motioned to Colonel Conger. The colonel went over to her and engaged her in conversation.

"You don't find him yet?" she asked.

"No, Mammy, I don't find him."

"Well, you find him. He's here all right."

"We'll find him if he's here."

She repeated, "You done find him!"

The searching party returned from their second search and reported that they could not find the Union soldier who was supposed to be imprisoned there. If a prisoner had escaped their detection he was well hidden some place.

Colonel Conger returned to the old colored lady and asked her if she was certain the prisoner was there.

"You go clear to the top. He's here all right, Colonel."

"All right, I will search for him myself."

Conger went up to the second floor and looked around. He did not check the rooms because he was satisfied that his searching party had checked them thoroughly. From his conversation with the colored woman, Conger was led to believe

there must be a loft between the second floor ceiling and the roof. A closer search of the corridor revealed a ladder and a trapdoor above the ladder between the joists. Colonel Conger ascended the ladder and pushed open the trapdoor leading into a low, dark loft. In the garret he found the man they had come to look for.

Colonel Conger, in the years following the war, rarely talked about this situation. He never intended to publish an account of this mission to Port Marlborough and the condition of the prisoner they found in the loft. The prisoner was securely fastened to the floor in such a way that he could not stand on his feet. The astounding thing the colonel noted was the method used in securing the man. There were two clamps of iron that were made with a hinge and clasped with a padlock. These clamps were fastened around his neck. They were an inch and a half thick and had prongs projecting from them which prevented him from laying his head on the floor. The man, when found by Conger, was lying there moaning and gasping.

"The dirty cowards. Treating a human being worse than a ferocious animal."

With the help of the surgeon who was with the company, the neck irons were removed and the prisoner lowered to the second floor. A detail of soldiers carried him outside and removed the remaining shackles from the prisoner. The surgeon made a stretcher of sticks and a blanket and had two soldiers carry the man to camp. The detail of soldiers did not enter the jail again but formed guard lines in front of the jail to prevent others from entering.

"Who is responsible for this dastardly deed?" Conger demanded loudly. "The responsible person or persons should be severely punished."

There was no response from any member of the crowd

outside the jail. The colonel was so infuriated at the mob that he would have burned them out of their town if they had antagonized him any further.

"Lieutenant, have your company disperse this mob and then march them back to camp."

The prisoner was later returned to Washington and Colonel Conger was never informed of the aftermath, if any, of his mission. Later information revealed that the Union soldier had been arrested in that area for horse stealing.

This military mission to Port Marlborough ultimately led to Colonel Conger's connecting one of the Negroes held in the jail with the final apprehension of Booth.

Conger returned to the jail to interrogate the Negroes imprisoned there.

"Why are you people held here in jail?"

A Negro man answered, "To keep us from going away."

"Don't you know the President has freed all slaves? No person may be held against his will."

"Yas, suh, reckon we heerd, but the men say they goin' to keep us here."

Colonel Conger had the barred doors unlocked and the Negroes brought out.

"You are all free and may go when and where you want to."

Preparations were made to break camp and return to Washington because their mission had been accomplished. The released prisoner was placed in an ambulance under the care of the surgeon. Before the troops could move out they were delayed by a group of Negroes coming to the camp to see Colonel Conger.

"Why are you coming back to town? You have been released and are free to go on your way."

"We done went, Colonel, but a group of men down there wouldn't let us go."

"What men? Where are they?"

"Down the road a spell, that's where."

"What did they tell you? Why did they prevent you from going on your way?"

"They don't say nuthin. They done catched us and won't let us go."

"How did you fellows get here?"

"We see'd the others cot. We run back here to see you. We done see'd them. They down there."

One of the second lieutenants in the troop was a daring and eager officer so Colonel Conger selected him to accompany him on a ride down the road to investigate this new matter. The horses were all saddled preparatory to starting back to Washington so the two officers left immediately to overtake the group of men down the pike. After riding two or three miles they encountered the men who were holding the group of freed Negroes. There were four men in the group, older men, and one had been a slave driver or overseer. They were armed with shotguns and rifles which were used to hold the Negroes captive. The Negroes had been corralled inside a fence at the entrance of a large estate. The plantation home always sets back from the road a distance, unlike Northern homes which are built close to a road. The group by the fence did not observe the two officers until they came up to their group.

"What are you gentlemen doing?"

A spokesman answered, "We are fox hunting."

"Only fox hunting?"

"Yes, sir."

Conger selected one of the men to act as spokesman for

the group. The man selected appeared to be a wealthy landowner. He was well advanced in years and seemed capable of explaining the real reason for this group meeting.

"You people stack your guns right up in the corner by the gate."

"If we do not comply, sir, what course will you follow?"

"It will then be necessary to use force and you would be guilty of interfering with United States troops in the performance of their duty. A serious offense, sir."

"May we have a brief conference to discuss our points that we think enter into the situation?"

"Take a few minutes if you like."

After a few minutes of talking the spokesman walked over to the gatepost and leaned his gun against the fence railing. "It is best to submit to the strong will strongly armed."

The other three men stood in a group and made no effort to comply with Colonel Conger's order. They had arrived at their own decision and the next move was up to the colonel.

"Put your guns up against that fence."

"This gun is my own property and I cannot see any necessity for parting with it—orders or not."

"Well, look here and listen. You can take your guns and go home peaceably if you will. If not, I will take you back to Washington and God only knows when you will get back. You know, or ought to know, that the Emancipation Proclamation has been issued and you have no more right to hold these people than you have to hold me."

The four men decided that they would comply with the colonel's order and let the Negroes move off on their own.

Some people believed that the Negroes could not get along when thrust out, free, into a new and strange world.

The Battalion of the First District of Columbia Cavalry proceeded from Port Marlborough to their camp in Washington without further incident. Colonel Conger would have reason to remember the Port Marlborough expedition because it helped to furnish the clue to Booth's whereabouts two years later.

## PURSUIT . . .

BOOTH AND HEROLD WERE STILL AT liberty a week after the death of the President. Many rumors and letters concerning the whereabouts of the fugitives poured into the headquarters of the Department of Washington, but these were found to be false.

Colonel Conger at this time was recuperating in Washington from a leg injury sustained in combat. He was assigned to the Command of General C. C. Augur, of the War Department.

When Colonel Conger reported to his office on Monday morning, April 24, 1865, the Chief Clerk informed him that an old Negro wished to speak to him.

"Why does he wish to speak to me?"

"He did not say, sir. He was brought here from Port Tobacco."

"Isn't Port Tobacco near Dr. Mudd's home? The last place Booth had been seen?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is this man now?"

"He is back in another office, sir."

"Very well, I will interview him now."

Colonel Conger went to the old man and said, "Uncle, where did you come from?"

"Po't Tobacco, suh."

"Who brought you up here?"

"Don' know, suh."

"When did you come?"

"Yest'day, befo' evenin', suh."

"Do you know why they brought you up here?"

"No, suh, don' know; don' know who got me nor what fo'. In de fust place some men took me; den some sojers came and den dey got me up heah." '

Soldiers had been searching the whole area along the Potomac seeking information pertaining to Booth's possible route of escape.

"Well, where have you been?"

"Well, suh, I done been in Washington till de close of de wah."

"Where did you come from before that?"

"Marlboro, suh. Ah done come up fum dere den."

"Where have you been since the close of the war?"

"People say de war ober, so ah go back down to Marlboro."

Colonel Conger detailed his previous experience in Port Marlborough, in the summer of 1863, to the old man. The Negro man was very attentive and smiled and said, "Yes, suh, you am de man. You done set us free from the jail house dere. You catched dem men down de road who kept us behind de fence."

"Yes, I am the man who released you and your friends from the jail and later from some other men who refused you your freedom. This is a time of great trouble and we will need all the help we can get to straighten things out. If you have any information that may help us in capturing these assassins please tell us now."

"Yas, suh, I tell."

"Thank you, we will appreciate it."

"Well," he said, "when ah come fum dere mah ol' woman and I had hid some things undah a log in de bayou. When de war over we go back there to look for de things we hid. We walking along de bank of de bayou when we heerd voices. Peeping through de bushes we see two men in a boat."

Colonel Conger had several pictures of Booth and he held them up for the old Negro to see. Negroes were superstitious and would not hold a photograph in their hands.

"Did any of the men look like this fellow?"

After looking at the photographs, the old Negro said, "Yas, dat's de man ah saw dere."

He said he had seen the men in the boat in the evening but did not see anyone the next morning.

"When did you meet the other men who asked you what you had seen?"

"De nex' mornin, suh. Dey ask me had we seen any men along de river or in a boat."

"What did these men do to you?"

"While we talking, two sojers riding horses came along and talk to de men. One man say to sojers, 'This darky has seen Booth.' "

The two cavalrymen were part of a large force that was scouring the countryside in search of the fugitives. They were anxious for the reward and they pushed the two men aside and took the Negroes along with them.

One of the soldiers demanded to know where they had seen the fugitives and the direction in which they were travelling. The old Negroes would not tell them, and remained silent to further questions.

One of the soldiers said, "We have lariats on our saddles and will use them to string you from a big tree limb if you

continue to refuse answering our questions."

The threats of the two soldiers did not work on the Negroes. The cavalrymen turned them over to a member of the Army detective staff who brought them to Colonel Conger's headquarters in Washington.

The commanding officer of the Sixteenth New York Cavalry was requested by the Military Department of Washington to detail twenty-five men, well mounted, with three days' rations and forage, to report at once to Colonel Everton J. Conger.

The detail left Washington by boat on April 24th and arrived at Acquia Creek that night. The remainder of the night was spent in combing the Virginia shore of the Potomac for any evidence of the fugitives. The local farmers were very reluctant to give assistance or information to the soldiers.

The troop continued toward the Rappahannock River and arrived at Port Conway on the morning of April 25th. Booth had crossed here, by ferry, the day before.

The authorities had not sent men down the Potomac River to look for Booth because the river was full of gunboats from the Navy, with ropes stretched between them and with searchlights on the boats. They believed it to be an impossibility for a boat to cross the river undetected.

In Booth's diary he says, "We tried one night and could not go. We tried another night and there was a storm and we could not make it." The next attempt was unsuccessful but the following night, April 23rd, in the dark and storm they got through between the gunboats.

At nine o'clock the cavalry detail was halted on the bank of the Rappahannock River, thirty miles below Fredericksburg.

"Lieutenants, station guards on all roads southward while the remainder of the troop is ferried across the river," Conger ordered. "We do not want a warning of our presence given to the fugitives."

The Rappahannock is navigable clear up to Fredericksburg and at Port Conway there was a ferry for crossing the river. A small town was opposite the troop, on the south side of the river (Port Royal). It took until late in the afternoon to get the twenty-five men with their horses ferried across. The ferry carried five horses at a time, but some trips it could carry only four horses and a wagon.

The ferryman informed Colonel Conger that two men answering the description of Booth and Herold had crossed the river with three Confederate soldiers the day before. This was the first real scent that they had found.

It was near evening when the troop left the ferry and by sundown had passed Garrett's farm, nine or ten miles southward on the road to Richmond. The troop continued along the Richmond road eighteen or twenty miles, looking for signs of Booth and his friends.

The cavalrymen had been in the saddle all night and all day and were in need of rest and sleep. Why should their commanding officer drive them so hard? Booth could not escape them now. Lieutenant Dougherty heard their grumbling and decided to consult with Colonel Conger concerning preparations for a halt and possibly making camp for the night.

"Do you plan to halt the troop for the night, sir?"

"Any delay now, Lieutenant, may cost us our prize."

"The men and horses are worn out, sir."

"There will be time enough to rest when we capture our fugitives. They have encountered friends who will assist

them in many ways. Tomorrow morning may find them on fresh horses and able to outride us."

"The men are grumbling, Colonel, and may cause trouble if we do not stop for a brief rest."

"That is your affair, Lieutenant, you are in charge of the behavior of the troop."

Colonel Conger was determined not to show signs of fatigue himself though his hip injury was paining him continually.

As the troop approached the Garrett farm they were seen by some Negro children who ran back to the Garrett house and informed them that the Yankees were coming. Booth and Herold were at the Garrett house at the time and they dashed from the house to the woods nearby until the troops had gone on.

Booth and Herold had crossed the Rappahannock a day ahead of their pursuers. They had hired a man with a horse and wagon to drive them to Bowling Green. While waiting for the ferryman to bring the ferry to their side of the river Booth heard horses approaching along the road. Three Confederate soldiers appeared at the ferry and demanded to be ferried across the river. They were Lieutenant Ruggles, Private Bainsborough and Private Jett, formerly of Mosby's command. They had been paroled at Leesburg on the upper Potomac and came through Alexandria, Fredericksburg and arrived at the ferry where Booth and Herold were waiting. Ruggles and Bainsborough lived in Bowling Green and Jett had a girl friend living there.

The soldiers said they would shoot holes through the ferry and the ferryman too if he did not come for them right away. An old Negro jumped on the ferry and began to push it to their side of the river.

The soldiers ascertained the identity of Booth and Herold and decided to help them in their escape. They said many people would help them along their escape route through the South. The horse and wagon were abandoned and Booth and Herold crossed the river with the soldiers. They tried for a distance to take Booth and Herold along on the horses they were riding but it was too conspicuous for five men to be riding three horses. In addition, Booth's leg was causing him severe pain and it was decided to find a farmhouse that would take him in.

Jett knew of a farm nearby that was a short distance from the road and where the people would be friendly. Jett's father and old man Garrett were old settlers in the country. When the group arrived at the lane leading to the Garrett farm Jett halted the group and told them that he would go in and arrange matters for Booth and Herold. Jett told Mr. Garrett that Booth was his cousin who had been wounded and could not travel any further. The Garretts were willing to help and provide lodging for the two men until Jett could come back for them. The Garretts were not told that they were accepting into their home the man who had killed President Lincoln. The three soldiers proceeded down the Richmond road to Bowling Green.

When the group of cavalrymen reached the ferry that had been used by Booth the day before, they met the man who had driven Booth and Herold from the Potomac to this ferry. While the group was waiting to be taken across the river Colonel Conger engaged the man in conversation.

"Where did you meet these men that you hauled here yesterday?"

"Back near the Potomac River, sir."

"Did you know who these men were?"

"No, sir, I did not."

"They were the men who assassinated President Lincoln in Washington."

"If I had known that I would not have bargained with them."

"What bargain did you make with these men?"

"The man with the injured leg paid me ten dollars to drive them to Bowling Green."

"Why did they leave you here at the ferry?"

"They met three Confederate soldiers here while waiting to be ferried across the river. These soldiers talked to them for a long time and they appeared to be friendly."

"Did they talk about their journey?"

"They told me that these soldiers lived in Bowling Green and that one of them had a girl there he was going to see."

"How could the man with the injured leg travel with them?"

"He rode on a horse with one of the riders but he sure was suffering pain in that leg."

When the entire squad of cavalrymen were across the river they proceeded at once, at a jog, southward along the Richmond road toward Bowling Green. The soldiers with Booth could not proceed at a fast pace and perhaps would be forced to rest often.

The cavalrymen kept close watch for Booth and his companions along the way. Booth had been warned of their coming and had taken to the woods. He returned to the Garrett house after dusk and tried to secure a horse and wagon in order to leave immediately. The Garrett boys were reluctant to give him their horse but said they would drive them to Bowling Green the next day.

The troop of cavalrymen continued riding toward Bowl-

ing Green and just as it was getting dusk, they noticed rising dust in the distance.

"Lieutenant Baker, there is somebody on the road ahead. I can smell the dust."

"I believe you are right, sir."

"I can also see what appears to be fresh horse tracks. Keep the troop moving at this same pace and I will go to that turn and see."

It was getting dusk when Colonel Conger turned his horse off the main road to follow the horse tracks. After travelling a half mile or so the colonel noticed that the tracks left the road. There was a large house near this point and Colonel Conger decided to question the occupants concerning the fugitives. Inside he found a number of girls who were eager to see any strangers, especially if those strangers had money. The place was some kind of an inn or tavern because there was a bar at one end of the room.

"Did any of you see some men ride by here yesterday or today?"

The girls were reluctant to talk at first but one answered that she saw some men go by yesterday.

"Were they all riding horses?"

"One was riding with one of the others," one girl said sullenly.

"Did you notice if one man had crutches or appeared to be injured?"

The girls hesitated to answer again and then one girl decided to act as spokesman and said, "One man was carrying crutches."

Another girl stated that she did not see a man with crutches.

The spokesman said, "Well, several of them came back along the road today."

"Were they some of the men that you saw riding south yesterday?"

"They were the same."

The colonel could not secure any additional information from the girls and decided to push south to Bowling Green. If the Confederate soldiers lived there they would surely stop for the night at their homes. The cavalrymen outside were grumbling again and wanted to stay at this place for the night. It was a dejected troop that jogged along the road to Bowling Green.

It was near the Garrett farm that Colonel Conger saw the rising dust and he was close on the track of Booth and Herold but he did not know it at the time. The dust was raised by Ruggles and Bainsborough returning to the Garrett farm to warn Booth that Federal cavalry were on the road. The cavalrymen might search all homes and the woods would offer safe hiding until they passed.

The cavalrymen entered Bowling Green at about midnight. The small village was asleep as the troop rode along the main street toward the center of town. The sound of the riders was the only noise heard in the still night air. Colonel Conger halted his troop before the town's small hotel where Jett was supposed to be visiting his lady-love. The mother of Jett's girl was the owner of the hotel.

The cavalrymen dismounted and were posted around the hotel so no one could escape. A trooper found a Negro boy behind the building and brought him to Colonel Conger. The boy led them to a small shanty at the rear of the hotel where an old Negress was scolding the troopers for arousing her from her sleep.

"We are looking for some men and we believe they are stopping in this house. One man has a broken leg."

"Dey's some men here, but I ain't seed one with a broken leg."

"Is there a man by the name of Jett staying in this house?"

"Yas, suh, he's here. He come to see his girl friend."

"Do you know where his room is?"

"Yas, suh, upstairs, first door to the right."

Colonel Conger was met at the front door by the young girl's mother. She was holding a candle and asked the reason for this disturbance during the middle of the night.

"We are looking for some men, one with a broken leg, and we believe he is in your house."

"There is only one man here and he is staying with my son."

"Is this man's name Jett?"

"Yes, he is the man staying with my son. He's my daughter's friend."

"Show me to his room."

"Wait here until I get another candle."

"I will take this candle and you wait here until I return."

The house was dark and still. Conger moved slowly up the stairs, pistol in hand. The door to the room on the right was not locked and Colonel Conger pushed it open and advanced into the room.

He observed two young men in bed. One man raised up and sat on the side of the bed.

"Is your name Jett?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get up and dress. I want you."

Jett got out of bed and was putting on his clothes when Lieutenant Baker, the officer with Conger on the case, and Lieutenant Dougherty, in command of the troops, came up

the stairs and into the room.

While Conger waited for Jett to finish dressing he asked the girl's mother, who was waiting out in the hall, if they could use another room for interviewing Jett.

"You may use any room up here, Colonel."

Conger said to his two lieutenants, "Take him into the next room and do not allow him to escape."

Jett asked, "Which is the commanding officer here? I want to talk to him."

"I am Colonel Conger, in command of this expedition."

"Can I see you alone?"

"You may talk in front of my officers."

After a brief hesitation, Jett said, "I know what you want."

"What do we want?"

"You want to find Booth."

"We know who you are, and your connections with the man we are seeking."

"If you promise me that I shall not be harmed I will tell you where they are."

"I can't promise you, but if you will tell me where he is I will see that you get the benefit of all I can do for you when you need it."

"He is within six or seven miles of the Rappahannock."

Conger exclaimed, "Why, I have just come past there."

"I supposed you came up from Richmond."

"We are from Washington, out seeking John Wilkes Booth. You come and show me where you left him. If he's there and I don't get him, that will be my fault. If he's not there, it is your fault."

The group in the room went outside and preparations were made to return back along the road to the Garrett farm.

Jett's horse was brought around from the stable by one of the troopers.

"Get your troop mounted and ready to ride, Lieutenant Dougherty."

Many of the soldiers had fallen asleep on the porch or on the ground. Colonel Conger had the bugler call "Boots and Saddles" to awaken those who were around the side of the building.

The troop moved out into the main street and began the journey northward. The commotion at the hotel and the call of the bugler brought the townspeople from their homes. They stared at the troopers as they rode by, wondering what could be happening in their small town.

At the edge of town the troop broke into a gallop and went flying along the road. The end of this weird assignment was in sight. A few grains of sand remained in the hourglass.

## CAPTURE . . .

The cavalry troop rode back the twenty miles to the Garrett farm and arrived there before daylight. The soldiers sensed the end of this grueling search.

They were halted at the entrance to the Garrett farm. A country lane led from the road to the house. The gate leading into the lane was opened by a trooper and the cavalrymen rode slowly down the lane toward a low fence.

"Lieutenant Dougherty, keep your men in the saddle and wait here until I return," the colonel directed. "Lieutenant Baker, accompany me to the house."

Colonel Conger spurred his horse a little and he jumped over the low fence. They rode right up to the front of the house and found it dark and still. Up against one side of the house was a small "lean-to," its door open. They returned to the troop to plan their line of action.

"Lieutenant Dougherty, have your troop follow me to the house and then spread them around the house so that no one can escape to the woods in the rear."

The horses walked slowly and the men tried to make as little noise as possible in order to surprise the occupants while they were still asleep. In a few minutes the farm house was completely surrounded by cavalrymen.

Colonel Conger walked through the open door of the "lean-to" and knocked on the kitchen door. A girl came to

the door and asked what he wanted.

"I want to see the man of the house."

The girl returned to the doorway holding a candle and there was an old man with her. He was Mr. Garrett, tall, gray-haired and quite old.

"Where are those men who are stopping with you now?"

"Sir, they are not stopping with me. Sir, they never stopped with me and my son. I want you to know we never harbor people like that. They are gone."

"Where did they go?"

"They went into the woods today."

Old man Garrett remained silent to further questioning. Colonel Conger tried to show him the seriousness of his act in protecting the murderer of President Lincoln, an act punishable by hanging.

Finally the girl said, "Don't hurt the old man."

"No, but I want to know where these men are."

A young man in Confederate gray was led into the kitchen by two troopers. They had found him sleeping in a corn crib near the house.

"Who are you, my son?"

"I am Bill Garrett, and you are holding my father. Do not hurt the old man, sir."

"Do you know where the two men are who were staying here?"

"I will show you where they are."

Young Garrett pointed to the barn, a little distance from the house, and said, "They're in the barn."

"Bring me a candle, young man."

While Bill Garrett went to get a candle Colonel Conger walked out toward the barn to see how it could be secured. He returned for the candle and went back to the barn to

secure the door. Conger picked up several poles near the barn and placed them against the doors so the fugitives inside could not get out and sneak away in the darkness.

"Lieutenant Dougherty, station your men around the outside of the barn."

The soldiers did not stay in their assigned positions but sought shelter wherever they could find it. Colonel Conger was greatly displeased at this show of cowardice.

"Lieutenant Dougherty, are you with your men?"

The lieutenant was hiding behind a wagon box and Colonel Conger ordered him out to keep his men in position.

"Come out of there, you damned cowardly scoundrel. If you don't keep these men in their places here those fellows in the barn will get away."

Conger placed his candle upon the ground and helped put the soldiers back in their positions. He took a stick and laid it where he wanted one of them, Sergeant Corbett, to stand.

"Do not leave your post, Sergeant Corbett, on any condition."

"Yes, sir."

Booth and Herold were awakened from their sleep by the voices and tramp of men outside of the barn. They must have realized from the first that the Federal cavalrymen had returned and were here seeking them. From the amount of talking and other noises outside the barn Booth knew a large body of men was present.

Booth shouted from inside the barn, "Who is there?"

Lieutenant Baker answered, "It don't matter who's here. We came to arrest you and take you prisoners."

Lieutenant Baker made the demand that Booth and Herold must come out and surrender. Colonel Conger returned

from the rear of the barn where he had been stationing his men and checking any possible means that Booth could use to escape.

Booth asked again, "Who are you?"

Conger answered, "I am a United States officer and in charge of troops of the United States, and we came to make an arrest. We are looking for you, Booth."

Booth replied, "Captain, you are a brave man; I could have shot you if I had wanted to."

Booth meant that he could have shot Colonel Conger when he was outside of the barn doors holding a candle. The colonel had secured the barn doors by placing pales against the door to prevent Booth from making a run for freedom.

Booth continued, "If you will draw back a hundred yards I will come out and give you a fair fight."

"No, I cannot do that. I simply came here as an officer to make an arrest and I can have no fight with you."

"Well," Booth answered," give me a show if you will. Get back twenty-five yards and I will come out and give you a fair fight."

"No, I did not come here for that purpose, and as far as I am concerned you are perfectly safe in surrendering. Further than that I can promise you nothing."

There was no reply from inside the barn to Conger's last statement. A silence had fallen over everyone on the outside. The soldiers held their carbines at belt level, ready to stop the men if they charged at them from the barn. Booth was conferring with Herold concerning their plan of action.

The silence was broken by Booth calling to Colonel Conger, "There is a fellow here who wants to surrender. I am in doubt. Give us a little time to think about it."

Conger left the front of the barn while the fugitives inside discussed their plight. He made a tour of the area to be

certain the soldiers were all in their appointed positions and ready for action. When he returned to the front of the barn he could hear a heated discussion taking place inside. Booth was berating Herold for wanting to lay down his arms and surrender to the Federal troops.

Booth said in anger, "I wouldn't leave a dog under such circumstances. I wouldn't go back that way. But go; I don't want you."

Herold was crying and imploring Booth to surrender. He realized the odds facing them if they tried to make a run for it. Herold may have thought he was not guilty of any serious crime in the matter and would not receive the full penalty of death, as would Booth.

Booth said to Herold, "I don't want to keep you."

Herold made his way to the door of the barn and waited for the men outside to open the door for him. Lieutenant Baker was crouched outside, waiting for the men to come out. He had to be sure that they would not try any tricks.

Baker said, "You must hand out your arms first."

Booth answered, "The arms are mine; I have them."

Colonel Conger was close by and checked with Lieutenant Baker to be sure they were ready to receive Herold when he opened the barn door.

Conger called to Booth, "Put him out."

Lieutenant Baker opened the door, just wide enough to permit a man to walk through, and stood ready to grab Herold when he came out.

Herold was removed from the front of the barn and securely tied. He appeared to be greatly upset and was crying hysterically. A heavy guard was placed over him because these men were to be kept alive in order to stand trial for their actions.

There was a long interval of silence after Herold was led

away. Colonel Conger did not desire to force the issue until Booth had time to give ample thought to his next move.

Booth sensed the reason for this silence and decided to state his decision.

"Well, men, I will not come out alive. I am alone now and I will stay it out alone."

The men outside noted that there was no fear in this man such as Herold had shown. He spoke in a well-modulated voice and appeared to be considering this situation as another stage performance. An actor to the end.

Conger called, "Booth, I am here to take you alive. I cannot shoot to kill you. I don't want any fight with you. I am here to take you a prisoner. If you don't come out I will set the building on fire. Then we will get you."

There was no answer from inside the barn. Booth was going to force Colonel Conger to take the next step. The colonel's statement concerning the firing of the barn could be an idle threat to force him to come out and face great odds. If he remained in the barn the odds were reduced.

Colonel Conger walked over to young Garrett who was standing beside Sergeant Corbett, along the front side of the barn.

"You get that bundle of pine boards over there and put them up against the barn next to the door."

Conger spoke in a loud voice so that Booth could hear him. He wanted Booth to realize that he intended to carry out his threat to burn the barn.

Young Garrett was willing to comply with the colonel's order. He picked up a large number of pine boards and stacked them against the barn, near the door. Then he came back to the colonel instead of securing more boards to place against the barn.

"I don't want to put any more up there, Colonel Conger."

"Why not?"

"That man inside said if I came up there again he would shoot a hole through me."

"That's all. You don't need to go there any more."

Booth called out from the barn, "Well, my brave boys, prepare a stretcher for me."

No one answered him. A hush had descended on the men poised outside the barn. The next move was up to Conger.

Booth continued from the barn, "I ought to have some fair show for my life, but prepare a stretcher for me."

Booth was playing the role of an actor even in this serious situation. Perhaps he thought he should carry on the tradition of his family. He was a member of a family of distinguished actors and was an actor himself.

Colonel Conger went to the back of the barn to try to burn him out. The Garrett boy had informed the colonel that there was a pile of straw there in which they had stored some wagon wheels. The colonel pulled out some of this straw and twisted it into a heavy strand. This was lighted and used as a torch to ignite the remainder of the straw. The straw burned fiercely and in a few minutes the fire spread all along the back of the building.

Conger waited for some time to see what course of action Booth would take. He heard something drop on the floor of the barn. Looking through the cracks, he could see that it was Booth's crutch. Booth was standing, facing the door about twenty feet away. He turned and noticed the light of the fire. Moving to the back of the barn with a carbine in both hands, he tried to see out through the cracks in the wall of the barn. The fire was burning too fiercely for him to see through the flames and the smoke. Conger stood perfectly

still outside and though Booth tried to look outside he could not see Conger through the blaze and the shadow.

Booth intended to pull the burning straw down and put out the fire, but just then it reached the roof and the cobwebs flashed like powder. His countenance changed. He dropped his carbine to his side and started for the door.

Colonel Conger was observing Booth from his position outside the rear wall of the barn and when he saw Booth start toward the door of the barn, he started around the barn toward the front door. Conger could not make very rapid progress because he was lame. He had been seriously wounded some time before this while leading his command in battle. He had been shot through the hips.

Conger pulled his service revolver from its holster as he moved to the front of the barn. As he reached the front corner of the building, opposite Sergeant Corbett, he heard a shot. Lieutenant Baker entered the barn a few seconds ahead of Colonel Conger. Booth had fallen forward and lay on his right side. He was shot through the first cervical vertebra.

Conger said, "Well, he shot himself."

"No, he didn't shoot himself," Lieutenant Baker said angrily.

"Who shot him, Lieutenant?"

"I believe it was Sergeant Corbett, sir."

A squad of soldiers carried Booth out of the barn and placed him upon the grass outside. The colonel ordered the Garrett boy and some soldiers back to the barn to see if they could put the fire out and save the structure. The entire barn was engulfed in flames but the men were able to remove some equipment from the barn before they were forced back by the intense heat.

Conger came back to the group that had gathered around Booth to observe this strange man who had taken destiny

into his own hands. Lieutenant Baker was kneeling by Booth's side, observing him to note if there was any sign of life remaining. Booth moved his lips and tried to speak. Colonel Conger knelt by Booth and heard him say, "Tell mother I died for my country." He could breathe with difficulty and use his tongue and lips a little. Conger repeated Booth's words and asked him if that was what he said.

Booth replied, "Yes, I did what I thought was best."

The heat from the burning barn was becoming unbearable to the group gathered around Booth. They had placed him on the ground a short distance from the barn. Conger ordered some soldiers to move Booth to the rear porch of the Garrett farm house. A young girl brought out a straw tick from the house and the dying Booth was placed on it.

Lieutenant Baker secured some whiskey from the house for the purpose of administering a few drops to Booth. Booth requested Baker to lift his hand. When Baker lifted it up and he perceived that it was paralyzed he muttered, "It's useless."

In a few minutes Booth began to have spasmodic twitchings of his face. He was unconscious and his breathing had almost ceased. A blanket was brought and placed over the still form. Some records say that the wounded man lived for an hour or more but Colonel Conger noted the time when he died and claimed that he did not live over thirty minutes. Booth was dead when a local doctor arrived to administer to him.

Colonel Conger stepped from the porch and stopped a sergeant who was going past and asked him, "Who shot this man?"

"Sergeant Corbett, sir."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

Conger had instructed his men to take Booth and Herold

alive if possible in order for the fugitives to stand trial in Washington. Secretary Stanton had so instructed Conger at the start of the expedition. Some time before this a man suspected of being Booth had been strung up along the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad until he was nearly dead. A friend of this man happened to come by and insisted that the man they were hanging was not John Wilkes Booth. The crowd was convinced and cut the man down from the pole. A near fatal incident. When Secretary Stanton heard of this mob action he issued a proclamation that any person who, without due authority, should injure any prisoner, should be tried before a United States Military Court and punished.

Colonel Conger ordered some soldiers to find Sergeant Corbett and bring him before his colonel.

One of the lieutenants brought Corbett to Colonel Conger and said, "Colonel, here is Sergeant Corbett."

Sergeant Corbett stood at attention, his shoulders squared back, looking straight ahead; he was every inch a soldier.

Conger looked at the sergeant and noted his erect bearing and military manner. What should he do with the fellow?

"Corbett, what in hell did you shoot for?"

Corbett looked straight into the eyes of Colonel Conger and said simply, "Providence directed me, sir."

Conger had been brought up in a religious family and had unshakable faith in Providence. The colonel was under great emotional stress, like the others who were involved in this venture. The ordeal was trying to even the strongest men in the expedition. At this exact moment Conger was uncertain as to the right course of action to follow. Booth was dead upon the porch, the barn was still smoldering, dead tired soldiers were sleeping on the grass, and Corbett stood before him waiting for his colonel to dismiss him. Conger

was thinking that things just as queer had been done before. He turned to the wall to avert Corbett's gaze. The fellow was a strange one all right. What to do with him now was a problem. Conger finally concluded that maybe Corbett was right.

"That's all, Corbett, you can go."

Technically the colonel should have put him under arrest.

It was daylight when the exhausted troop rode slowly down the Garrett lane to the road back to Washington. Colonel Conger could now report to Secretary Stanton that the mission was accomplished.

## CONCLUSION . . .

THE WEARY TROOP OF CAVALRYMEN reached the Potomac River in a few hours and waited for a mail boat that would take them to Washington.

Colonel Conger reported to Secretary Stanton's house the following day at four o'clock in the afternoon. Secretary Stanton had returned from his office earlier in the day because of illness. He was very excited when Conger's presence was announced. He informed the servant to show Conger into his study.

"Well, sir, we got back and we got Booth and Herold."

Stanton was noticeably upset and said, "Don't say that unless you know it."

"Well, at any rate, I will show you proof which ought to be sufficient to satisfy anybody."

"What proof do you have, Colonel?"

"The papers that were found on Booth, sir."

The Secretary studied the papers carefully before replying, "These seem to be the property of John Wilkes Booth."

The papers contained two sets of draft-warrants for money, drawn by the Confederate States Treasury, by someone in Richmond, on a bank in Montreal and payable in pounds, shillings and pence. One was for five hundred pounds and the other for two hundred and fifty pounds. There were first, second and third drafts for each amount.

Colonel Conger believed that they were payable to John Wilkes Booth.

The days following were very hectic for all persons involved in the assassination plot. The body of Booth was examined for certain identification. Many witnesses were examined during the official proceedings. These examinations were conducted before a Judge Advocate General Holt, a big, gray-haired Kentuckian.

Colonel Conger appeared before Judge Holt to describe the actual capture of Booth and Herold. The judge was particularly concerned about the shooting of Booth in the barn.

Judge Holt asked, "Did you give the soldiers any orders not to shoot?"

"No, I did not consider that necessary."

Judge Holt said, "I wish you would prepare a specification against this Sergeant Boston Corbett."

Conger did not reply to the order of Judge Holt and was discharged with the rest of the witnesses. He returned to his office to pick up his work that had been interrupted by this special assignment to find Booth.

A week or so later an adjutant called at Conger's office to see him.

"Is your name Conger?"

"Yes, I am Colonel Conger."

"The Judge Advocate wants to know if you have prepared specifications against Sergeant Corbett."

"No, I have not."

"Well, the Judge wants to know why you have not complied with his order."

"Well, I didn't exactly understand that what he said was an order. It was given to me verbally at the time of the inquiry as to Booth's death and identity, and I did not under-

stand what the Judge wanted."

"You will hear again from Judge Holt concerning this matter."

In a day or two a messenger from the Judge Advocate General's office visited Conger and delivered a paper signed by Judge Holt, directing Conger immediately to prepare and file charges and specifications against Sergeant Corbett. The charge was to be violation of discipline in killing John Wilkes Booth. The colonel had to act officially and not dismiss the order as he had done previously.

Colonel Conger received the order from Judge Holt in the afternoon and kept it that night. He still did not wish to press charges against Sergeant Corbett. The following day Conger visited the War Department and talked to Judge Advocate General Holt.

"Sir, I would like to talk to Secretary Stanton concerning the Corbett case."

"Your orders concerning Corbett are very clear, Colonel."

"I still believe that Corbett did not disobey any direct command, sir."

"Do you wish to see the Secretary of War today?"

"If I cannot see him today I would be willing to call at his house tonight if that would be more convenient."

Judge Holt went into Secretary Stanton's office to see if the Secretary could see Colonel Conger at this time. Upon his return he said, "It is all right for you to see the Secretary now."

Colonel Conger entered the Secretary's office and noted that Mr. Stanton was busily writing at his desk. The only sound was the continuous scratching of the pen on paper. This continued for some time and finally Stanton asked, without looking up, "Did you want to see me, Everton?"

Colonel Conger and Secretary Stanton had known each other in Ohio before the war.

"Yes, Mr. Secretary."

"What do you want from me?"

"I have an order here from General Holt to prepare at once charges against Sergeant Boston Corbett."

"Why don't you do it?"

"I cannot comply with that order."

"You've been a soldier long enough, have you not, to know what it is to disobey orders?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, there is nothing else to do than obey."

"Secretary Stanton, you know as well as I do that it was with a feeling of great relief that the American people learned that Booth was dead; not only that, but there is a feeling of glorification of the man who killed him, and now here I am selected to prefer charges against him. Mr. Stanton, I have been in the war from the beginning. I am no three months' service man. I am not one of these real nice soldiers, though I have never been put under arrest nor complained of materially, but I won't obey that order. If I have got to suffer for it I have got to, that's all."

"Have you got that order, Colonel?"

"Yes, sir."

"Give it to me."

This was the last Conger ever heard of the matter. Secretary Stanton evidently rescinded General Holt's order to bring charges against Boston Corbett.

Colonel Conger secured a brief record of Corbett's army history that served to guide him in making a decision as to whether or not to prefer charges against the man. Corbett was considered by many of his soldier associates as not being

of right mind. He was in a New York regiment first, then in a Connecticut regiment for a short term. Corbett's regiment was stationed in Washington during the time of his first year's service and he was in the guardhouse half of this time. Every time an officer would swear he would go and preach to him. He was an exhorter and street preacher of a sort. At one time he was detailed to go out on picket duty somewhere near the old Bull Run battlefield. Corbett informed his officers that at twelve o'clock that night his term of service ended and he would not serve longer. His officers informed him that he would have to serve until mustered out. Sometime during that night he stuck his musket in the ground and left. It was learned later that he had enlisted in the cavalry service. Proceedings were brought against him for deserting in the face of the enemy. He was found guilty and sentenced to be shot as a deserter. He was later pardoned on the ground of being *non compos mentis.*

Boston Corbett spent most of the last year of the war as a prisoner of war in Andersonville prison. The conditions in Andersonville were beyond description. Thousands of prisoners were crowded into an open enclosure of twenty-five acres. Of these, four or five acres were swampy, and could not be occupied. Inside of this enclosure, thirteen thousand two hundred and fifty Union soldiers perished, averaging more than one thousand deaths for every month that the prison existed.

Two prisoners did a great deal to help the morale of the poor unfortunate prisoners. They were a prisoner named Shepard, a native of Ohio, who had been a minister at home, and Boston Corbett, a native of New Jersey. These two men preached to the prisoners frequently, and their preaching accomplished a great deal of good. They were, indeed, nature's

truest noblemen, perfect gentlemen, and earnest, true Christians. They devoted almost all their time to giving spiritual consolation and advice to their fellow prisoners. They appeared never to weary of doing good, and could frequently be found at the side of the dying, entreating them to look to Him who would deliver them from all their misery and suffering, and receive them to a better and brighter world above.

Booth had stated during the half hour that he lived after receiving the fatal bullet, "Tell mother I died for my country." His second statement was, "I did what I thought was best." Colonel Conger heard these last words and promised to deliver them to Booth's mother. Conger delivered Booth's dying message personally to his mother in Baltimore and stated, at a later date, that she was very understanding and seemed to appreciate the kind act of conveying her son's last thoughts to her.

John Wilkes Booth is believed to be buried in the Booth family lot in Greenmount Cemetery in Baltimore. One of the graves on the lot is marked by a low headstone which is unlettered. This particular grave is supposed to contain the remains of the man who assassinated Abraham Lincoln.

Colonel Conger received personally $15,000 of the $25,000 reward offered for Booth's capture. Later he was appointed Territorial Judge for Montana. He died in Honolulu, T.H., where he was living in retirement with his daughter and son-in-law. His son-in-law, Honorable Joseph B. Poindexter, was at that time territorial governor of the island.

## POSTSCRIPT . . .

A SPECIAL MILITARY COMMISSION was created to try the conspirators who helped plan the assassination of President Lincoln. The Commission consisted of nine army officers and three members of the Judge Advocate General's office. The Commission heard testimony from scores of witnesses but the prisoners were never called upon to testify in their own defense.

The eight prisoners were found guilty and subject to severe sentences. The sentences were determined by President Johnson, Secretary Stanton and Judge Advocate General Holt. These men were guided by the intensity of public feeling and the infuriated demand for execution by the whole Republican party.

Four of the prisoners, Arnold, Mudd, Spangler and O'Loughlin, were sentenced to long years of imprisonment at hard labor. The four principal conspirators, Mrs. Surratt, Atzerodt, Paine and Herold, were sentenced to be hanged by the neck until they were dead.

The public sentiment following the executions abated and even turned against the men responsible for the execution of Mrs. Surratt. Some party members of influence tried to shift the blame away from the administration to the men who carried out the execution, notably General Winfield Scott Hancock.

General Hancock had been recalled from his corps in the field to become commandant of the Washington Department. The officer who had charge of the prisoners was the newly appointed Provost Marshal, Major General John F. Hartranft.

Judge Clampitt, Mrs. Surratt's leading counsel, stated, "Hancock had no more to do with these details or matters than you had." (Don Piatt, publisher of the Washington *Capitol.)* When Judge Wylie, with a Roman majesty of character, issued, almost at the peril of his life, the writ of habeas corpus in the case of Mrs. Surratt, President Johnson and Secretary Stanton decided to suspend the writ, and the execution followed.

"We had hopes to the last of a reprieve and a pardon for Mrs. Surratt, and I waited at the Arsenal, hoping against hope. General Hancock rode down, and approaching him, I asked, 'Are there any hopes?' He shook his head slowly and mournfully, and, with a sort of gasping catch in his speech, said: 'I am afraid not. No; there is not.'

"He then walked off a bit—he had dismounted—and gave some orders to his orderlies, and walked about for a moment or two. Returning he said to me:

" 'I have been in many a battle, and have seen death and mixed with it in disaster and in victory. I've been in a living hell of fire, and shell, and grapeshot; and—I'd sooner be there ten thousand times over than to give the order this day for the execution of that poor woman. But I am a soldier, sworn to obey, and obey I must.'

"This is the true and genuine history of all that Hancock had in common with the affair. He was commanding, and as commander and conservator of the National Capitol, was compellantly obedient to the orders of the court, which sen-

tenced the conspirators and the so-called conspirator to death. He had no voice in the matter, and could have no action save as the agent to see that the letter of the law was carried out in an order of alphabetic certainty."

The order of President Johnson directing the execution of the condemned parties was transmitted through the commandant of the military post to Major General Hancock, who had been designated by the President in executive order, dated May 1, 1865, as a special provost marshal for the purposes of said trial and attendance upon said commission and the execution of its mandates. General Hancock, being chief in command of the Washington Department, had to pass the order of the President to the officer specially designated by the same authority (Hartranft) for carrying out the executions.

Brevet Major General Hartranft, and not General Hancock, gave the verbal order of execution, after first reading, while standing on the platform beside the prisoners, the finding of the military commission and the President's order of approval.

Mrs. Surratt's counsel sued the court for a writ of habeas corpus. On the morning of the execution, upon proper application, at the early hour of two o'clock, Judge Wylie issued the writ of habeas corpus, ordering the commandant of the military district in which she was confined to produce Mrs. Surratt in his court at ten o'clock. The hour of execution had been named in the order as between 10 A.M. and 2 P.M. General Hancock appeared in obedience to the court summons before Judge Wylie, accompanied by the Attorney General of the United States, who, as the representative of the President, presented to Judge Wylie an executive order suspending the writ of habeas corpus.

Executive Office, July 7, 1865—11 o'clock, A.M.
To Major General W. S. Hancock, Commanding:—

I, Andrew Johnson, President of the United States, do hereby declare that the writ of habeas corpus has been heretofore suspended in such cases as this, and I do hereby especially suspend this writ, and direct that you proceed to execute the order heretofore given upon the judgment of the military commission, and you will give this order in return to this writ.

*Andrew Johnson,*
*President*

General W. G. Mitchell, chief of General Hancock's staff, said that Hancock was deeply moved in the matter and had hopes the President would relent at the last moment and issue a stay of execution. Should the President so act, that the reprieve might not arrive too late, but be borne swiftly on its misison of mercy, General Hancock had couriers stationed at points from the White House to the Arsenal, to carry a pardon or respite to its destination promptly and before the execution.

The President did not send a reprieve and the order of execution was carried out by Major General Hartranft.

The four bodies swinging at the end of their ropes in the bright sunshine on a hot July day brought the final curtain down on America's greatest tragedy.

(*Continued from front flap*)

made a distinctive contribution to American history. The narrative contains Colonel Conger's own words plus explanatory descriptions concerning the times, events and places mentioned by the narrator. No attempt has been made to embellish any phase of the story.

Dr. Reuter points out that Colonel Conger, who was a lawyer and a judge with a distinguished record in the Civil War, was somewhat modest and reticent in disposition. The contrast between the reserved manner of the Army officers and the bravura conduct of the defiant Booth (an actor even in his final moments of life) heightens the intense drama of the scene in which the assassin meets his death in the blazing Garrett barn.

The reader will find this a consistently absorbing and exciting story, as well as a valuable sidelight to a significant episode in American history.

*Jacket design by William Ashman*

# About the Author

William L. Reuter was born in York, Pennsylvania, in 1906. He attended high school there and was graduated from Millersville State Teachers College in 1931. He holds graduate degrees in education from Duke University and Temple University.

Except for four years in the U.S. Navy, from 1942 to 1946, as a Lieutenant Commander, Dr. Reuter has made his career in the academic world. History, education and psychology are his specialties, and he has written and lectured extensively on extra-sensory perception. He has taught at the University of Vermont and at Westminster College in Pennsylvania, and is now Professor of Secondary Education at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

His wife, the former Helen M. Ettline, is also in the teaching field. They have a teen-age daughter and son.

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